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As the Middle East crisis intensifies, many members of the local Jewish community have stepped up to take an active role.

"Nearly 60 years ago, at the founding of the state of Israel, we as a community vowed to do everything in our power to help the Jewish state," said Midge Shafon, chairman of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago's board of directors, at a news conference last week. "That commitment is as deep as it is enduring. When Israel is attacked, we in Chicago respond."

Israeli defense forces launched a military operation last week against Hezbollah, a Shiite militant group in Lebanon, after the group killed a total of eight Israeli soldiers and kidnapped two others from northern Israel in a cross-border raid. Though the group holds seats in parliament, the Lebanese government denies having anything to do with the attacks.

Rockets continued at press time to fire from both sides of the border, killing innocent Israeli and Lebanese civilians and soldiers. Israeli officials say they will agree to a cease-fire when the kidnapped soldiers are returned and Hezbollah withdraws from the border area in southern Lebanon.

Israel's northern region has been the target of rockets fired from southern Lebanon, and both the Jewish National Fund and the JUF are organizing fund-raising efforts to move children out of the area to summer camps in more central parts of Israel.

Rick Krosnick, the Midwest zone director for the JNF office in Northbrook, said \$500,000 has been raised so far to bring Israel's children to safety. Krosnick supports Israel's military campaign, saying the country has been held hostage by two terrorist organizations, Hezbollah and Hamas, for many years.

"We have to ask ourselves: What would any nation do faced with similar kinds of

circumstances?" he said.

After Israeli forces pulled out of Lebanon in June 2000, the Lebanese army never brought troops to the border. When Hezbollah claimed the territory and began firing into the northern part of Israel, the Israeli government asked JNF to build security roads along the border. The \$19 million project, which spanned 19.2 meters along the Israeli-Lebanese border, was completed in 2003.

Krosnick compared Israel's current conflict with Hezbollah to that of the United States' fight with al-Qaida.

"Only in Israel they have to deal with these issues on a daily basis," he said.

JUF sent an initial \$25,000 July 13 to help move children and recent immigrants out of the range of rockets. The group is beginning a huge fund-raising effort and the reinstitution of its Israel Emergency Campaign.

"It is traumatic for everyone, but especially for Israel's children," Shafon said. "Chicago's Jewish community is responding immediately to help them find safe refuge, and to assure that our brothers and sisters in Israel know they are not alone."

To help spread the word and increase support, the Jewish Community Relations Council of the JUF organized the "Rally for Israel" at noon Monday in Chicago's Federal Plaza.

Police estimated that about 5,000 people gathered to show their solidarity with Israel.

Israeli Consul General Barukh Binah; Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan; Illinois Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka; U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, and Dan Seals, Kirk's Democratic opponent, attended the rally. Kirk said he was pleased that the representation at the rally was completely bipartisan.

Kirk said one in five people in his district come from a Jewish heritage. He said America's first priority should be to ensure the safety of its citizens in both Israel and Lebanon, and the United States should then focus on helping the weak Lebanese government regain control of the southern region of its country.

"I think the most important thing that can happen is that we put the Lebanese government in charge of all of Lebanon," Kirk said.

Seals defended Israel's effort to protect itself from attacks by terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas. He is proud the United States continues to be an ally for Israel.

"I believe the Bush administration and diplomats should re-engage in active diplomacy in support of Israel to address the underlying causes of the violence," Seals said. "We must act to stop the escalation before Iran and Syria are further drawn in, and before more innocent lives are lost."

Many people at Monday's rally came from the northern suburbs, including Cantor Roger Weisberg from Congregation Beth Judea in Long Grove who opened the event with the singing of Israel's national anthem, "Hatikvah."

Weisberg had just returned from a trip to Israel with members of the congregation who were reminded of the tenuous and fragile nature of the security in Israel.

"Beyond the additional prayer offerings in our daily and Sabbath services, we're encouraging our members to be as involved as they can," Weisberg said. Though he is not worried about any backlash from the conflict occurring in the United States, Weisberg does fear that this will turn into a full war.

"Thank God we have America's support and the president coming to the defense of Israel's situation," he said.

Wilmette organization

While several nations, including the United States, have been finding ways to get their citizens out of Israel and Lebanon as quickly as possible, members of the Parents of North American Israelis, a family support group based in Wilmette, have a different outlook.

According to member Barbara Kahn, everyone in the group has children or grandchildren who have chosen to make their home in Israel.

"We try not to take a political position, but be as supportive of our children as we can," Kahn said.

The group has chapters in different cities across the country. Kahn's son, who lives in Israel, rarely talks of the conflict and believes in finding a peaceful solution.

"Naturally, we're concerned," Kahn said. "You just hope and pray that all the people come to their senses and realize that they should be living together in peace."